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ABSTRACT

Perspectives of public school and postsecondary administrators concerning college-school cooperation were surveyed, as were their responses to the recommendations of the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, "A Nation at Risk, The Imperative for Educational Reform." Four school district superintendents, 26 elementary/secondary school principals, and 5 university administrators were interviewed. Principals' responses included: 67 percent planned to initiate or expand their computer science instructional program, 57 percent did not plan to change standards and expectations or instructional time/schedules, and 80 percent had no plans to obtain community support to meet the Commission's recommendations. Four areas to promote cooperation between public schools and colleges were mentioned by principals: preservice or inservice teacher training, college entrance requirements, and teaching assistance in content areas. Interviews with the five college or university administrators suggested that one obstacle to cooperation with public schools was a reward system that favored scholarship more than service. Most inservice training and collaboration involved one or two schools or school districts, especially those close to a university. Responses of the superintendents are also summarized. (SW)

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Public School/Post-Secondary School Cooperation in Response to "A Nation at Risk"

A report of descriptive research conducted by the Southern Tier Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa

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Introduction

The National Commission on Excellence in Education provided a report to the President in April 1983 entitled, A Nation at Risk, The Imperative for Educational Reform. This report became the unifying theme for the activities of the Southern Tier Chapter for the 1983-84 academic year.

Part of this emphasis involved a descriptive study which would explicate the nature of cooperation between public schools and post-secondary institutions in the area with regard to the issues raised in A Nation at Risk. The findings of this research endeavor were expected to serve, in part, as a basis for communication about the national report and further initiatives by the local chapter in support of cooperative efforts.

Acknowledgement is made to the Phi Delta Kappa district office which provided funding to conduct the research.

Methodology

A three-part survey was conducted to elicit the perspectives of three groups whose inclusion was felt to be fundamental to cooperative efforts between elementary/secondary schools and institutions of higher education. Building principals were surveyed by mail to gather their buildings' response to both the report of the federal commission and a preliminary version of proposed educational changes initiated by the New York State Board of Regents. Principals were also asked to elaborate on how they envisioned post-secondary institutions cooperating with local schools to assist in meeting the recommendations of the national report.

A survey instrument was constructed, field-tested, and revised. Then two copies with a cover letter were sent to the forty-six public school superintendents in the area with instructions to pass the surveyes on to their building principals whom they felt were best able to respond. Thirty useable surveys were returned (33%).

The same survey was sent to the six post-secondary institutions in the area (two universities, two colleges, two community colleges). Administrators at each of these institutions were identified who were felt most probable to be integrally involved in any cooperative efforts with area school systems. Four of these surveys were returned and subsequent interviews were arranged with representatives of the five

cooperating post-secondary institutions. (Deans of Education or Directors of Off-Campus Programming).

The interviews were semi-structured, conducted by a research assistant, and designed to elicit additional elaboration regarding their experience and perspective towards cooperative/collaborative relationships with area school districts. It was indicated to the interviewees that no attempt would be made to compare responses across institutions and anonymity was assured.

Finally, arrangements were made to conduct semi-structured interviews with four area school superintendents to probe their perspectives on school/university cooperation around issues raised by the National Commission Report. The superintendents were asked to describe any current cooperative relationships in which their districts were involved and to reflect on past experiences. They were also asked to describe the sorts of problems or impediments they experienced in working with colleges and universities, and their hopes and desires for any future arrangements. Four area superintendents were interviewed, their selection based on an attempt to represent large, medium and small sized school districts and on urban, suburban and rural locations. Again, it was indicated that no attempt would be made to compare school districts or divulge the identities of the superintendents interviewed.

The written surveys and the transcribed notes from the personnel interviews have been analyzed by the chapter research representative according to standard qualitative research

practice. The research assistant who conducted the interviews was consulted to confirm and substantiate interpretations of the interview data.

Results

School Principals

Principals were asked to report what they firmly planned to do (or had already begun) as a result of the National Commission report. This part of the questionnaire was structured in five categories: content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and fiscal support. Each of these categories will be treated separately. These were a total of thirty respondents, twenty were secondary principals, six elementary principals, and four were district-wide administrators or support personnel.

Content

A large proportion (67%) of the principals surveyed report that they have or will initiate, expand or elaborate their instructional program in computer science. This was the single most frequently noted area of modification in content. Some districts had established goals for computer literacy, others had added more advanced courses, several mentioned expanding exposure to computers in the elementary grades. This is clearly the single most important area of activity reported.

Mathematics, foreign languages, language arts/English, and social studies were mentioned with roughly equal frequency (20-25% of the respondents). Some of the districts mentioning changes in these areas were adding new courses and requiring additional units of credit for graduation. In these cases the intention seemed to be either to add courses of either an advanced placement nature, or to develop modified coursework for

lower achieving students. Science was the content area mentioned least frequently by the respondents (7%).

Several of the changes mentioned referred to curricular revisions or adoption of new texts. It was not clear whether these were truly changes in response to the national report, or were routine modifications of an "updating" nature.

Standards and Expectations

Seventeen (57%) of the respondents reported no changes were adopted or planned. Several expanded this indicating that they were satisfied their standards and expectations were appropriate and no changes were necessary. Five respondents (17%) indicated they had, or would shortly, adjust upward the number credits necessary for graduation. Several others indicated they would wait and raise the number or composition of credits for graduation only if required to do so by the Regents.

Time

Seventeen respondents (57%) indicated that they had no changes planned in this regard. Some indicated that this might be a possiblity in the future, others said that changes in this area would occur only if mandated.

Six of the respondents (20%) explicitly mentioned "time-on task" as the emphasis their school district was using. Cited were inservice programs and supervision strategies planned or already utilized to make instructional time more meaningful. Some confusion apparently exists in this regard however, one principal stating that they "already have an extra period for students needing more time on task."

Other respondents looked to streamlining their school day as a way of making more effective use of time. Two respondents noted shortening of lunch periods and cutting back on the number of study halls while concurrently adding another teaching period or lengthening the school day. Two others were committed to reducing "interruptions" of teaching time.

Teaching

Twenty-three respondents (77%) indicated that nothing was being done or planned with regard to making teaching a more rewarding and respected profession. Several of these principals added that salaries were negotiated and beyond the control of an administrator. It is unclear how many respondents interpreted this question in financial terms.

Those mentioning planned or initiated action in this regard indicated newsletter recognition, teacher of the month/year plans, etc. Two others noted increasing the variety of in-service programs and in-service programming on motivation as steps taken toward making teaching a more rewarding and respected profession. Two others mentioned frequent, observations with extensive and detailed feedback emphasizing positive behavior and personal thank yous.

Leadership and Fiscal Support

Twenty-four respondents (80%) indicated that nothing had been done or was planned with regard to community support for the Commission Report recommendations. Of the remainder, two noted that the recommendations were being reviewed by their boards of education, three described in general terms that information

about planned changes and responses to the national commission had been communicated to the public. Another inferred public membership on a curriculum committee. Another cited a parent advisory group (which had been in existence for six years) as a vehicle for discussing changes.

School District/Post-Secondary School Cooperation

School principals were asked to envision how public schools and post-secondary institutions of higher education might cooperate to assist in meeting the recommendations of the national committee report. The principals responses varied considerably in length and content, but may be usefully summarized into four categories: preservice teacher training, inservice teacher training, college entrance requirements, and teaching assistance in content areas.

Six principals (20%) suggested changes in preservice teacher education which would be helpful in meeting the recommendations of the National Commission. In general, these involved more rigorous coursework programs, greater emphasis on practice and field work, longer student teaching experiences, and shared supervision/evaluation of student teachers. One principal outlined a plan for involving undergraduate majors in arts & sciences in student teaching experiences as a way of attracting possibly more skilled people into becoming teachers. Implicit in these suggestions was the assumption that the quality of new teachers ought to be improved.

Seven principals (23%) made suggestions that might be subsumed in the category of inservice education. Specifically

the suggestions, involved ideas such as inservice programs in content areas, demonstration teaching, and consultation to curriculum committees.

Ten principals (33%) commented on the need to develop/expand current efforts of post-secondary institutions in providing advanced coursework for qualified high school students. Some applauded already existing arrangements whereby qualified high school students could attend college classes, others requested offerings by post-secondary faculty taught in off-campus satellites. There was some indication that perceived needs were stringent in areas of science, computers, and mathematics.

Finally, five principals (17%) suggested that post-secondary institutions set clear and rigorous course requirements for admission. There was sentiment that this would help prod high school students into taking more rigorous loads, especially in areas of mathematics and science.

Only two principals directly addressed the request that they suggest "mechanisms" to advance their suggestions. Both envisioned the need for a committee or group to more thoroughly articulate how such cooperation would occur. One principal dispaired that there was little chance substantive cooperation would, or could occur. Another summed up their perspective with, "We are miles apart. It's all hit and miss. Step 1, let's sit down and talk."

Chief School Officers - Their Perspective

This summary must be treated with some caution as only four superintendents were interviewed and because the interviewer was perhaps perceived as a representative of a university faculty member. The first caution concerns the generalizability of the opinions expressed to all area superintendents; the second, to the quality of the data itself. Diplomatic people manage impressions carefully. With these reservations, three themes were clearly apparent in the interviews.

Perhaps the most persistantly expressed theme was a resigned pessimism to substantive change in the current stasis regarding cooperative relationships. Universities were perceived as having fundamental differences in intent and function from public schools. Colleges and universities seemed fully occupied with nuturing their own interests (research, specific subject matter, their own group of students, etc.). Furthermore, there was some suspicion as to whether universities understood the problems of public education in such a way as to be of real help.

Each of the superintendents interviewed was able to cite specific examples of cooperative relationships with higher education institutions. The Syracuse School Study Council was mentioned as a model of cooperative interaction which seemed to reach beyond the usual instrumental needs of teacher training sites or enrichment programming on the college campus. But there was little optimism for, and no specific proposals as to how,

substantial modifications might be made in currently operating cooperative relationships.

The second theme threading through the superintendent interviews was that cooperation would be welcomed, but only on the school district's terms. Superintendents described their idea of cooperation as one in which the school district determined what it needed and the cooperating agency (higher education institution) provided it. From the superintendent's perspective problems in this cooperative model involved who to contact at the university, the relatively high costs charged by universities, slow responses to requests, or that resources required were either unavailable or university faculty were not interested with the project proposed.

This action-oriented, "request-provide" model for problem resolution is efficient as long as the school district knows what is needed and as long as the institution of high education can provide it. The model seems less effective when such ideal conditions do not maintain. Only one superintendent suggested a more interactive, explorative model.

The third theme emerging from the interviews with the superintendents was an openness to consider and continue what has been successfully conducted already. All superintendents were able to cite collaborations with universities and colleges that were satisfactory and useful. These collaborations were generally of a traditional nature (student teaching and internship experiences, consultancies etc.) or were described in ways that would suggest a serendipitous quality to the

cooperation (a project as a consequence of a personal relationship, etc.)

University Perspective

Five interviews were conducted with college and university administrators, all but one of whom held a faculty rank in their institution's professional education program. While they represent five of the six major post-secondary institutions in the Southern Tier some care must be taken in generalizing from their remarks. First, there is great diversity among these institutions regarding their missions as institutions of higher education. Secondly, they each represent a very hetrogeneous group of faculty whose personal orientations toward service to the community vary considerably.

Cooperative Endeavors

Most of the interviewees were able to cite a variety of planned, ongoing, or recently concluded cooperative relationships. Taken together, they represent an impressive and bewildering assortment of collaborations. Rather than listing or describing even the more interesting kinds of cooperations it seems more useful to examine these endeavors for similarities and trends. First, most of the endeavors involved only one or two schools or school districts. Thus, while occasions of collaboration were relatively numerous, the net effect on any one of the forty-six school districts in the Tier has been small. Second, there appear to be frequent collaborations with school districts close or contiguous to the post-secondary institution. Districts

some distance from any college or university probably have little or no opportunity for collaboration beyond an occasional student-teacher placement. Third, the type of cooperation generally appeared to be of the one-way nature described by the school superintendents, i.e. the university provides a service to the school.

There were some other interesting arrangements, however. One college exchanged a faculty member to a BOCES and accepted an experienced teacher onto their teacher education program staff on a one-year basis. Another institution recently received a three-year grant to develop chemistry and physics curricula in conjunction with area high school teachers and students.

Issues and Impediments

Several interviewees readily volunteered that one of the most formidable obstacles to cooperative efforts was a university reward system that weighted scholarship activity more heavily than service activity. Often faculty were reluctant to enbroil themselves in cooperative activities which would take time away from research. Other faculty had internalized the primacy of scholarship and were simply not interested in more applied collaboration unless it fit their particular areas of interest.

College faculty in subject areas other than education were reported to be consummed by their subject area, but often not particularly interested in teaching younger students. They made a poor match with secondary teachers who were frequently more interested in the teaching aspects of their profession. Not infrequently, subject matter faculty held teacher education

programs in low regard and were perceived to disdain collaboration for this reason. Even at post-secondary institutions without a strong research press, special problems were reported to mitigate against cooperation. There exists something of a struggle over students who are in a position to seek coursework which might be available either through their high school or through a post-secondary institution. By training high school teachers in newly emerging areas such as computer technology, for instance, a community college might deprive itself of students able to get the education they needed through their high school. Special knowledge or skills becomes, if not power, at least a guarantee of full classrooms.

Finally, several interviewees expressed the feeling that school districts simply did not look to colleges and universities in the area for inservice training or collaboration. Schools were more interested in field-tested programs available through national in-service education brokers.

Mechanisms for Enhancement of Cooperation

The university administrators/faculty interviewed tended toward wistful thinking when asked what could be done to enhance cooperation. One spoke of the need for external funding either through the state education department or private foundations to enable summer curricula institutes or seminars on research implications for teachers. Another bemoaned the frequent "one-shot" nature of inservice programming as exemplified by "Superintendent's Days" and intimated more university interest would be forthcoming if schools would be willing to involve

faculty over a longer period and take a more developmental approach to change. Another spokesperson indicated that internal changes were necessary; that the university reward system needed broadening to fully recognize the importance of service in schools before serious cooperation would be possible.